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North Carolina A&T State University
School of Agriculture and
Environmental Sciences
Newsletter
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April 2011 • Vol. X, No. 2

Martin County's J&J Farm named best in small-scale agriculture



Thomas Pierce stops at the hog pen his sons maintain. Pierce, owner of J&J Farm in Martin County, is the 2011 Small Farmer of the Year.

Like all farmers, Thomas Pierce knows he can't do anything about the weather. Nonetheless, an early March day finds him fretting that strong overnight winds have blown debris across his perfectly aligned rows of strawberries and collards. He's already picked up most of the storm remnants. But every now and then, Pierce spots a stray piece of plastic and — though quite unnecessary — picks it up and apologizes for it.

"I like for it to look good," Pierce says. "By looking good, you get more traffic."

That attention to detail is just one of the factors in Pierce's selection for the 2011 N.C. A&T Small Farmer of the Year Award, announced on March 23 at the 25th annual Small Farms Week ceremonies at A&T.

Pierce, 38, and his family operate J&J Farm in eastern Martin County, with 10 acres

in fruits and vegetables, including strawberries, sweet potatoes, collards and cabbage grown on black plastic; summer and fall tomatoes, watermelon, potatoes, onions and lots more. Pierce uses drip irrigation, as well as a "traveling reel" to keep his farm hydrated — practices that offer a sustainable approach to farming.

J&J Farm is a family operation, with Pierce's wife Holly handling record keeping and his brother, father and father-in-law pitching in. His sons Joshua and Jackson — as in "J&J" Farm — feed chickens and pigs that Pierce keeps mainly for his sons' 4-H projects. Pierce also hires seasonal workers as needed.

Although he wasn't raised on a family farm, Pierce spent many a day working for other farmers to earn extra money while growing up. When he brought property more than seven years ago and decided

to farm, Pierce started with soybeans, added corn and then switched to cotton.

Realizing after a few seasons that to be profitable, he'd need more than the original 4 acres he purchased, Pierce bought 17.5 more acres. He also decided to switch to fruit and vegetable farming, and called the Martin County Cooperative Extension Center for help with the transition.

"I said get down here. I want to plant some strawberries," a laughing Pierce recalls. "Produce was a different thing for me. I needed somebody with more information than what I had."

Pierce, a 4-H alumnus, was already acquainted with Cecil Sumner, agricultural and natural resources technician for Martin County Cooperative Extension, whom he'd ask for advice if he happened to run into him. But since Pierce began fruit and vegetable production, Sumner and other Cooperative Extension agricultural experts have provided expertise and guidance. Sumner got Pierce on A&T's rotation for black plastic, which generates earlier yields. Sumner helps him with certification paper work, identifying insects and remedies, and with any number of issues that arise.

As beach traffic on the way to Nags Head, Kill Devil Hills and Manteo whizzes right by J&J Farm on U.S. 64, Pierce and family are ready. From Memorial Day to Labor Day his strawberries, melons and other fruits beckon to passing motorists from the roadside stand he built, and business is constant enough that Pierce is building a second

stand to keep up with demand. He's also installed a cold-storage unit to keep the produce fresh as it comes from the field.

"With traditional farming, you plant, you grow, you harvest," Pierce says. "With this stuff, you sell it or you smell it."

Those berries that don't make it home with beachcombers in a day or two are turned into a value-added product of strawberry jam, which his wife makes. Cucumbers also find a second identity as pickles.

"This farm business will prosper because of the excellent quality of produce, great customer relations and a family all working together toward one goal," Sumner says.

Pierce's pickiness also seems a factor in his success. Beyond the aesthetic of maintaining an attractive place to attract customers, Pierce adamantly requires those working his farm to regularly use the hand-washing stations he's installed.

"I love to farm and provide my customers with fresh fruit and vegetables," Pierce says. "I am a good steward of the land and take care of it, as it is what takes care of me."

inside

- **N.C. Division of Child Development awards \$135,000 to Family and Consumer Sciences project.**
- **Orange County Small Farms Week Kickoff draws capacity crowd.**
- **Restaurant chefs who are buying local give guidance to small-scale farmers.**

FCS Research + Diversity = Quality Education

It's no secret that a globalized economy has changed North Carolina's demographics for good, and that change is felt nowhere more keenly than in the state's classrooms. According to a recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 14 percent of the Tarheel State's children now live in homes with at least one immigrant parent, and the "dual language learner" is commonplace in schools.

However, in preschools, education policy, curriculums and assessment standards haven't yet caught up with the demographics, and are still mainly based on one culture. Educators across the state agree that policies and practices in preschools need to change with the times if the state intends to retain its reputation as a leader in quality early childhood education. Many teachers are expected to teach children who don't speak English.

"As population changes teachers no longer have one culture in their classrooms. They have multiple cultures. It's becoming



Dr. Rosemarie Vardell



Dr. Valerie McMillan

more urgent that we address this issue," says Dr. Rosemarie Vardell, assistant professor of child development in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS).

Supported by a \$135,000 grant from the North Carolina Division of Child Development, Vardell and Dr. Valerie McMillan, Area Coordinator for the Child Development and Family Studies Program, are leading a project to develop solutions for schools. Even taxpayers who don't have children have a stake in the issue because statistics show that quality education in

the first five years of life means less money spent on remedial education and social problems down the road.

The two researchers hope to have a pilot program and policy recommendations on culturally responsive learning developed by October. They are now organizing collaborative teams that include policy makers, teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders in the education arena. In the coming months, the teams will create an array of culturally responsive learning techniques, and then test and track the outcomes. At the conclusion of the project, Vardell and McMillan expect to have enough information to make fact- and research-based policy recommendations on culturally responsive early childhood learning that will lead to tools and techniques for early childhood teachers.

"Quality early childhood education means quality for every child, not just some children," Vardell says.



Dr. Daniel Lyons, recognized for establishing N.C. Small Farms Week, which is coordinated annually by The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T State University, says he could not have done it without the hard work of agricultural supporters. Lyons was honored Wednesday, March 23 at the 25th observance of Small Farmers' Appreciation Day at A&T.



Attendees listen to Barry Jacobs and Dr. Noah Ranells during the N.C. Small Farms Week Kickoff and Orange County Agricultural Summit held at the Cedar Grove Ruritan Club in Cedar Grove Monday, March 21, 2011.

Small Farms Week Quotes

"Join me in asking our legislators to do this: not eat for three days before making a decision or a vote and I think they'll come away with a different perspective on what we do in agriculture."

Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture, at Small Farmers Appreciation Day

"Let's make sure that agriculture remains a strong, vital and integral part of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. If we don't educate the students, conduct the research and share that information with the citizens, who's gonna do it?"

Dr. Donald McDowell, interim dean for the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, at Small Farmers Appreciation Day

"I dropped my 7th-grader off at school this morning and I said: 'Just learn one thing today that you didn't know and that you didn't think I knew.' So I would say that to you as well."

Gerry Cohn, Southeast Pools Coordinator at Organic Valley CROPP, to Small Farms Week kickoff audience in Orange County Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

"Local food is growing and is here to stay. You guys have products that the community wants."

Matt Felling, produce buyer for Deep Roots Market, at Small Farms Week panel discussion of guidelines for farmers selling directly to grocery stores and restaurants

"The reason that we started Small Farms Week 25 years ago, was to bring special recognition to the work that you do. We wanted to appropriately honor farmers who keep us well fed, in some cases well clothed, and who are forever looking for ways not just to maintain your own livelihoods, but to help us all live better, healthier, safer lives because of the work that you do."

Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, associate dean and administrator of The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T

"On the farm I grew up on I learned how to count, do fractions, and take measurements. And I learned the value of putting in a full day's work."

Hon. Cressie H. Thigpen Jr. at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

"Commissioner Troxler just pointed out that agriculture is a \$74 billion business in North Carolina. Do you think it got that way by luck? Extension and research at our state's land-grant institutions have been the major factors in this."

Dr. Joe Zublena associate dean for Extension in N.C. State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Day Luncheon



The Honorable Cressie Thigpen Jr., who is serving a second appointed term on the N.C. Court of Appeals, says he learned hard work and endurance growing up on a Hoke County Farm. Thigpen spoke at the 25th annual Small Farmers' Appreciation Day celebrated Wednesday, March 23 at N.C. A&T.



Joe Thompson (left), the 2010 N.C. A&T Small Farmer of the Year, hears marketing advice from food experts **Brent Demarest** (middle) and **Jay Pierce** (right) and gives them a card. Thompson raises prawns on his Orange County Farm. Demarest represents Whole Foods Market and Pierce is chef at Greensboro's Lucky 32 Restaurant.

on the *move*

North Carolina A&T State University School of
Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Newsletter
*Produced by the Agricultural Communications and
Technology Unit*

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mailling_list_form.html](http://www.ag.ncat.edu/communications/mailling_list_form.html)

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The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T's farm safety and environmental specialist, Dr. Jimo Ibrahim (left) and two farmers, Charles Lucas and Magnolia Williams, assemble a high tunnel greenhouse at the University Farm — part of a lesson at a USDA-funded "growers' school" that gave small-scale farmers training in organic production, and greenhouse construction and management.

mark your calendars:

- Institute for Future Agriculture
Leaders (IFAL): June 12 – 17
- 2011 Research Apprenticeship
Program for High School Students:
June 26 – July 22
- Department of Agribusiness,
Applied Economics and Agriscience
Food and Agribusiness Industries
Summer Program: July 19 – 24

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